A birth-defect spike and a toxic-waste dump — Kettleman City, Kings County

Kettleman City is a predominantly Spanish-speaking, Latino farmworker community in unincorporated Kings County, built next to the largest hazardous-waste landfill in the western United States. In a single 14-month stretch starting in 2007, the town's birth-defect rate spiked to roughly eight times its historical baseline — and residents, not the state, were the ones who found it.

8.51%

Kettleman City's birth-defect rate, 2008–09 — versus 1.05% across the surrounding Central Valley counties the same years.

2016

Year the state settled a federal civil-rights complaint over the landfill's permitting, after a Title VI complaint filed earlier that decade.

What happened

Kettleman City sits beside the Kettleman Hills hazardous-waste landfill, operated under permits the state and Kings County have renewed for decades. The facility accepts hazardous waste, including PCBs. In 2009, the community group El Pueblo para el Aire y Agua Limpia and the environmental-justice organization Greenaction documented a cluster of birth defects and infant deaths over a 14-month period — a spike local and state officials initially tried to minimize, according to both groups. Possible causes residents and advocates raised include a toxic spill, a pesticide exposure event, or a rise in PCB disposal at the landfill at the same time PCB air monitors were reportedly turned off; no cause was ever confirmed. Separately, the town's groundwater carries naturally occurring arsenic and benzene left over from historic oilfield operations in the area — a second, independent water problem layered on top of the landfill fight. A planned treatment plant to pipe in California Aqueduct water was delayed for years; in the meantime, the state supplied bottled water for drinking, while residents continued bathing in and cooking with contaminated tap water.

In 2016, after Greenaction and El Pueblo filed a federal Title VI civil-rights complaint accusing CalEPA and the Department of Toxic Substances Control of racial discrimination in how they permitted the landfill's expansion, the state agreed — after seven months of federal

mediation — to a settlement: comply with civil-rights and language-access law, adopt new review policies, consider cumulative pollution impacts, stop intimidating residents at public hearings, pursue clean water for the town, and support health surveys and air and biomonitoring.

Impact — what we know, and what we don't

- **Birth-defect rates:** 0–2.22% from 1987–2007 (versus 0.86–1.02% in the surrounding counties); spiked to 8.51% in 2008–09; declined to 1.79% by 2010–11 (still above the 0.54% comparison-county rate that period). The state's 2010s review found the defect types matched normal surveillance patterns and no common cause — which rules out a single obvious culprit without ruling out a cause tied to local exposure.
- **The landfill's role:** Never confirmed or ruled out. This is the project's own honest gap, not a withheld finding — no public study has established what caused the cluster.
- **The 2016 settlement's follow-through:** Greenaction reports the state complied with some terms and violated or never completed others, and sent the state a formal letter about it in 2019. We have no more recent independent accounting of compliance.
- **Current water status:** Not confirmed in this pass whether the aqueduct treatment plant was ever completed.

Part of a larger pattern

Kettleman City is this project's starkest example of the water-and-land pattern Second Growth exists to document: a farm-labor community sited next to the infrastructure nobody else wants, carrying both an industrial-waste burden and a separate, unrelated drinking-water contamination problem at the same time. It sits alongside **Stratford's** recurring well failures and **Corcoran's** litigation as the third distinct kind of water story this project has documented in Kings County alone — contamination from legacy industry, from agricultural inputs, and from outright negligence, respectively.

Sources

- **Greenaction for Health and Environmental Justice, community profile, "Kettleman City, California."**

- KQED, "Kettleman City Birth Defects Declining" (citing California Department of Public Health birth-defect surveillance data). Access: not-captured — a public URL exists for this source and this project has not recorded it.

Full citation detail and source archive: **Data**. Back to **water insecurity in the Central Valley**.
